Peter Bakowski was born to Polish/German parents in Melbourne in 1954. He spent seven years traveling in the 1980s, living in London, Los Angeles, Cairo, Berlin and in a cave on a Mexican island. His first book *Thunder Road, Thunder Heart,* published in 1988, was followed by *In the human night*, which won the 1996 Victorian Premier's Literary Award. In the same year his *The Neon Hunger* was published in Canada. In 1998 came *The heart at 3 am*, and his current work, *Days That We Couldn't Rehearse*, was published earlier this year by Hale & Iremonger. Peter Bakowski has been a resident poet in Rome (1997), Paris (1999) and Western Australia. He tours constantly giving readings locally, around Australia, and has read his work in many countries including England, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Malaysia and the USA. His work has been published extensively in magazines in Australia and overseas. He is married with a son and lives in Richmond, Melbourne.

If poetry is about journeys both internal and external, Peter Bakowski is a poet who has experienced a wealth of both.

Born in 1954 with a hole in the heart, Bakowski's journeys in the internal poetic sense began with the writing of his first poem at a farmhouse in Waco, Texas.

Indeed his first poem was written as a "cry of the heart response" to receiving a letter from Melbourne with the news that a former amour had left him for another man. "I spent about nine hours at the typewriter and that was my first poem - the reaction to receiving that letter."

Bakowski's outward journeys have taken him to many destinations across the world. While his initial travel intentions were planned around a six-week trip, his subsequent wanderings ended in journey spent some nine years away from Australia.

No doubt travel has also had a profound impact on shaping Bakowski's poetic sensitivities, "I fell in love with a map of the world the age of six and having been born with a hole in the heart I have this sense of mortality that I want to do all my traveling now rather than later."

Certainly the notion of the journey is one that is very strong in Bakowski's consciousness as a poet, "I would say there has to be some sort of journey either as journey in one's thinking or a journeying physically and even if that just wandering your neighborhood and observing. Healthy poetry should be a mixture of the inward and the outward," he suggests.

Bakowski's poetry is also shaped by a strong sense of gratefulness and empathy for the human condition that stems from his own sense of mortality, the notion of "what it's like to be a human being" and the quest for truth as a poet. Part of this quest is also linked to Bakowski's philosophy that truth "… is a word to be

respectful of." As he further explains: "When you write something make it your honest feelings otherwise it's just a writing exercise. What's the point of writing something that doesn't take some sort of risk."

Indeed the idea of truth, directness and honesty in his writing is something that was strongly influenced by his reading of Charles Bukowski's work. "What I got from him [Bukowski] was clarity. That's also a reaction to the idea I got at high school that 'I can't understand this so it must be brilliant.' "

While many of Bakowski's experiences are tinged with the exotic nature of travel, the mundane is another aspect that has informed some of Bakowski's earlier work. Indeed one of his most vivid poems - *The Jaws of the factory* (*Graveyard shift*) - is based on Bakowski's own experience of factory life as a worker at the Granny Davis bread factory in the Melbourne suburb of Heidelberg working eight hours a day stacking bread as it came off a conveyor belt. "The factory life was my university in a way" explains Bakowski.

Bakowski also sees the idea of reading his work both at urban, regional and remote venues as playing a very important part in 'testing' his poems on an audience and gauging their responses to them 'in the real world.' "My primary reason for reading is to test the relevancy of my poetry and to read to people from the age of 15 to 90 and to read to people that I've never read before, as well as read to people whose nearest bookstore is several hundred kilometers away."

So how does Peter Bakowski go about the process of writing poetry? Perhaps this is best succinctly and somewhat eloquently summed up in Bakowski's statement that: "I often face a blank page not knowing what's going to come out and I consider each stanza as some sort of hurdle and I don't know where the poems' going to finish. I persevere and if I think the poem has got enough substance then I shape it up and fine-tune it. It's finished when nothing about it irritates or nags me. I rely on intuition more and more…"

Unlike many writers, Peter Bakowski is not one for keeping notebooks or journals, preferring instead to let his poetry speak for itself as a record of his life and his experience of the journey. Thus Bakowski also uses the technique of crafting poetic 'self-portraits' that he writes from time to time which record his present state of thinking, the forces that are shaping his life and his ideas at a certain moment, capturing the self-frozen in that moment. "A self-portrait just tries to capture what I'm thinking and feeling at a certain moment in my life at a time and a place and certain perceptions."

So what are Peter Bakowsk's views about the modern 'place' of the poet and the 'usefulness' of poetry? While Bakowski is not so much concerned about the place of the poet as he is towards the 'usefulness' of poetry, Bakowski believes that poetry can serve as a profoundly useful vehicle in providing solace to human beings, particularly those who are able to find comfort in its message and expression, "The idea of solace where someone can read something that you've

written and it makes them feel no longer alone, that someone else has gone through the same harrowing or confused time that they're going through…"

As Bakowski goes on to explain: "One of the nicest things - nice in terms of a complement to a writer - that happened was that I know someone who was in a psychiatric ward and that having [my book] *In the Human Night* and reading it over and over again got them through that period and was of great solace to that person."

What advice then would Peter Bakowski give to poets just starting to write? No doubt part of his philosophy about writing lies in the duel process of writing and editing, as Bakowski is a firm practitioner when it comes to writing and re-writing his poems as part of the process of achieving publication. "My biggest piece of advice would be to send your poetry out to magazines to test it in the real world. To be positive about your capabilities every time you approach the blank page of the computer screen. Practice writing daily if possible and try and practice for a minimum of two hours per day [if possible]."

No doubt we look forward to continue receiving a great deal more work from Peter Bakowski - a poet whose honest, direct and highly observant poetry has won him both praise and respect from audiences in Australia and in many other countries around the world.

Interview and Story by Marcus Niski, Copyright 2002

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